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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to describe how one classroom teacher uses the Sender-Receiver Communications Model to illustrate for students in a lively and memorable way the process of "targeting your audience" with medium and message. Students are used as examples of Receivers, or target audience, illustrating the potential range of characteristics (age, ethnicity, attitudes, etc.) and how instructors, as Senders, use these factors to shape communication with students. In this context, the need for demographic and psychographic research becomes clear. Next, the use of research to determine the choice of medium--the vehicle on which a message is delivered, such as radio, posters, or tee shirts--is discussed, noting the key factors of reception and credibility which influence audience preference. Many factors also affect the credibility of the Sender, including intentions, trustworthiness, and expertise, as perceived by the target audience. Several factors which can contribute to a failure to communicate are illustrated in the model. Entropy, or the tendency for matter to tend toward disorder, contributes to miscommunication through typos, misspellings, and other fact errors. The "Gatekeeper" (the person--for example, an editor--who decides whether a message will appear in the medium) is another important facet of the model, as are the elements of feedback and environment. After presenting the model, an exercise is assigned to students to reinforce how this information can be used in communication efforts. (Six figures--the sender-receiver communications model and five photocopied public service advertisements--are appended.) (MM)

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THE SENDER-RECEIVER MODEL AND THE TARGETING PROCESS

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THE SENDER-RECEIVER MODEL AND THE TARGETING PROCESS

ABSTRACT

A familiar challenge for public relations teachers is how to help students understand the process of "targeting your audience" effectively with medium and message. The goal of this paper on public relations teaching is to share how the Sender-Receiver Communications Model is used to illustrate the "targeting" process.

THE SENDER-RECEIVER MODEL AND THE TARGETING PROCESS

In the movie, "Cool Hand Luke," the red-neck prison warden succinctly summarized his on-going problems with prisoner Luke (played by Paul Newman) when he drawled, "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

How to avoid a "failure to communicate" is a familiar challenge for public relations practitioners as they undertake the third step in the public relations process: taking action and communicating. For public relations teachers, a familiar challenge is to how to help students understand the process of "targeting your audience" effectively with medium and message.

The goal of this paper on public relations teaching is to share how I use the Sender-Receiver Communications Model to illustrate for students in a lively and memorable way the process of "targeting your audience."

TEACHING METHOD:

A quick perusal of most introductory public relations texts will reveal a discussion of a model of the communication process, usually in the context of introducing students to the process of targeting audience with medium and message. "Models are useful in understanding communication as a process of sending and receiving messages," say Newsom and Scott, in This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations (p. 173, 2nd ed.). Cutlip, Center and Broom, in Effective Public Relations (p. 261, 6th ed.), warn, however, that "A

prime difficulty in understanding the complex communication process is its deceptive simplicity" (when portrayed in a model). The first challenge public relations teachers face, then, is to make sure students realize that any model of the communications process is merely a static oversimplification of a dynamic process.

A second challenge for public relations teachers is to share with students how useful this communications model can be when a public relations practitioner is faced with the process of "targeting" publics effectively with medium and message.

The teaching methodology on the following pages provides students with practical, real-world examples which illustrate each facet of the Sender-Receiver Communication Model; also outlined is how any one of these facets of the communication process might be a "weak link" in the targeting process, thereby causing a "failure to communicate." This discussion also introduces how important research is in the life of a public relations practitioner.

Also presented here is an assignment given to students in which they are asked to apply the knowledge gained from discussing the communication process as it applies to targeting your audience with medium and message.

THE SENDER-RECEIVER MODEL AND THE TARGETING PROCESS:

The Sender-Receiver Communications Model (see Figure 1) used for this discussion is more detailed than most; it includes additional facets of the communication process useful in discussing the targeting process, such as gatekeeper. (Using an overhead projector, I project this model on a screen and begin the discussion of the targeting process.)

It often comes as a surprise to students to learn that the Receiver is the place to begin. Many communication failures occur because the Sender does not know enough about the intended audience to make effective choices in message design or medium placement. This particular model uses the term,"perception capsule," to portray the physio-, psycho- and sociological factors surrounding each Receiver or audience member. I use the students themselves as examples of Receivers to illustrate the potential range in these characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, experience, attitudes, values, communication skills, etc., and how instructors, as Senders, use these factors to shape communication with students. This leads to a definition of a "public," i.e., a group with a common characteristic or shared bond.

In this discussion of the need for demographic and psychographic information about audience members, research as a communication tool begins to make sense to students. For other examples of how research can be helpful in the targeting process, we next look at how research is used to determine choice of Medium.

Medium, or the vehicle on which a message is delivered, could be as complex as radio or television, or could be as simple as a poster or a tee shirt. The key factors researchers investigate with Medium are reception and credibility. As for reception, does your audience actually receive or prefer to use the medium you have chosen? No message, no matter how persuasive, can be successful if not received. To illustrate, we peruse a recent issue of a local newspaper for content aimed at students; next I poll students on their actual use (reception) of that particular medium, which is

usually very low. This "failure to communicate" resulted from poor reception of the medium.

Another example of audience preference was found during a recent visit to a national park interpretive museum, where very few audience members were listening to a taped message which would play at the push of a button. These Receivers preferred other media which appealed to more than one sensory medium. On our Sender-Receiver Communications Model, Channel refers to the sensory characteristics of the medium: sight, sound, taste, feel and smell. I point out to students how this lecture involves multiple senses and media in an effort to improve reception.

Research into credibility can be organized into communication model areas of Medium, Sender and Message. We first discuss how credibility of Medium can vary with your intended audience and needs to be researched. I share the generalities found in research about rankings of the mass media as to their credibility and use student reactions to direct-mail appeals as one example. This provides an excellent opportunity to discuss why so much effort is put into gaining publicity time and space in the news media, i.e., improved credibility when covered as news.

Credibility of Sender, as portrayed in the communications model, involves the same "perception capsule" characteristics discussed earlier with the Receiver. Many factors affect the credibility of a

Sender, including intentions, trustworthiness, and expertness, as these qualities are perceived by the target audience (Cutlip, Center, Broom, Effective Public Relations, 6th ed., p. 263).

We discuss how Walter Cronkite, with his grandfatherly appearance and reputation for veracity, often appeared in polls as the most credible person in the United States. Unfortunately, he is not readily available to most communication campaigns to work as a Sender, so challenge your students with the task of evaluating who might be an effective Sender, given a program's intended communication goals and Receivers (publics).

To illustrate this point, I show how the U.S. Army chose to use a voluptuous female to communicate maintenance information in a monthly publication (Fig. 2). Attention-getting, perhaps, given the audience -- but hardly likely to be viewed as an expert source.

The following examples illustrate how Exxon chose to vary its Senders in two messages discussing energy issues , based on different intended audiences (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). In the first, a brochure obviously aimed at well-educated adults, the company itself is the Sender. In contrast, Mickey Mouse and Goofy serve as prominent Senders in the comic-like booklet, "Mickey Mouse and Goofy Explore Energy," clearly targeting young, less-educated readers.

Smokey the Bear comes to mind as one of the most successful Senders of messages to a very diverse audience through a variety of media (Fig. 5). But even Smokey was having problems a few years ago in his efforts to gently cajole forest users to prevent fires (Time, Oct. 3, 1977). In his ranger hat and overalls, Smokey has always used lots of "pleases" and "thank yous" in posters and broadcast

spots. In a dramatic change-of-pace, U.S. Forest Service staff decided to change the tone of Smokey's message. In a 60-second radio spot, Smokey would growl and then sing: "My name is Smokey and I used to ask folks nice/To stir their campfire with a stick and drown that fire twice/Now it's no more Mr. Nice Bear, 'cause I've had enough of you/Just one last time I'll speak my mind and here's what you'd better do/Wipe out your campfire, beat out the embers, drown it with water all the way through/Beat all the red out; make sure it's dead out/Or Smokey the Bear will break you in two...."

Smokey the Bear has been replaced, of course, by Woodsy the Owl as the primary Sender for most U.S. Forest Service messages. Other examples of successful Senders in national information campaigns include McGruff the Crime Dog (Fig. 6) and James Garner for the beef council.

Credibility of Message has reached the level of cliche. Most students can easily relate to the following "least credible sentences in the English language": "The check is in the mail," or, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help you." The goal here is to show students how pre-testing messages with intended audiences can reduce the likelihood of a message being rejected as a cliche or because it is filled with jargon. Too often our love for jargon exceeds our desire to communicate successfully. Even "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" can turn into: "Scintillate, scintillate, globule aurific/'fain would I fathom thy nature specific/Loftily poised in the ether capacious/Strongly resembling a gem carbonaceous."

Many factors which can contribute to a "failure to communicate," and as the communication model illustrates, Entropy (the tendency for

all matter to tend toward disorder) can contribute greatly to miscommunication through typos, misspellings and other fact errors. I usually share a few examples from my personal experience of how lack of careful proofreading or fact-checking led to a failure to communicate -- and then stress the importance of these skills to communication specialists.

Another facet of the communication model important to success or failure in the targeting process is the Gatekeeper. A Gatekeeper in the communication process is simply the person who has the power to decide whether or not any given message will appear in the medium. An editor at a newspaper who decides whether or not to use a news release, while not one's primary Receiver, becomes an essential audience to consider when writing news releases. I usually share research findings from Public Relations Review (see Morton, "How Newspapers Choose the Releases They Use," 12(3), pp.22-27 as one source) to illustrate findings about editor's roles as gatekeepers. Another factor to share with students is the potential for gatekeepers to distort the message before it is placed in the medium.

The communication model also portrays the critical element of Feedback, which raises the concept of "one-way" and "two-way" communication . As modeled, Feedback can provide the sender with information before or during the program to formulate or adjust activities and strategies, or with information about success or failure of the communication attempt (as the fourth step in the public-relations process). I cite examples of Feedback mechanisms used and of evaluation research into the effectiveness of

a public-education campaign to illustrate this point (see Larson and Massetti-Miller, "Measuring Change After a Public Education Campaign," Public Relations Review, 10(4), pp. 23-32).

Successful communicators also consider the Environment in which their communication efforts occur. Literal or figurative Noise in the environment can destroy even the best-designed communication effort. Again, it is possible to pre-test the Environment in which communication efforts will take place to see if Noise or environmental factors could create a "failure to communicate."

The dynamic nature of communication is illustrated in this Sender-Receiver Communication Model, as it portrays the Receiver becoming a Sender and generating a Message, which might be Feedback or aimed at another audience.

ASSIGNMENT:

The final teaching challenge is to reinforce for students how this information can be used in future communication efforts -- almost like a checklist -- to decrease the likelihood of a "failure to communicate." In my introductory class, I use the following assignment:

First, I ask each student to find a communications attempt that was designed to influence the "image" they held of some object or person; increase their awareness of some event (publicity); or perhaps persuade them to purchase something (advertising). I ask the student to include a photocopy or the original with the assignment.

Next, I ask students to conduct the following analysis, using information from our text and lecture described above on the targeting process:

*Identify the intended audience's characteristics as best as you can determine them. Note whether you were part of the intended audience and why this particular communications example came to your attention, if relevant. Are there any audience characteristics that may have particularly important roles in affecting success or failure of this communications attempt?

*Please summarize your perception of the Sender's characteristics; the intended audiences likely perception of the sender's credibility; and the difference between perceived characteristics of the source and reality -- if any.

*Identify the characteristics of the medium and the message and how they may have affaction the success or failure of this communication attempt.

*Discuss any gatekeeper function and/or potential effects in this example.

*Discuss any problems with entropy or noise in this example.

*Did the environment in which the intended audience experienced the communication attempt affect the success or failure of it in any way? (If not possible to evaluate for intended audience, did the environment affect you in any way?)

*What were the feedback mechanisms, if any, from the audience back to the sender in this example?

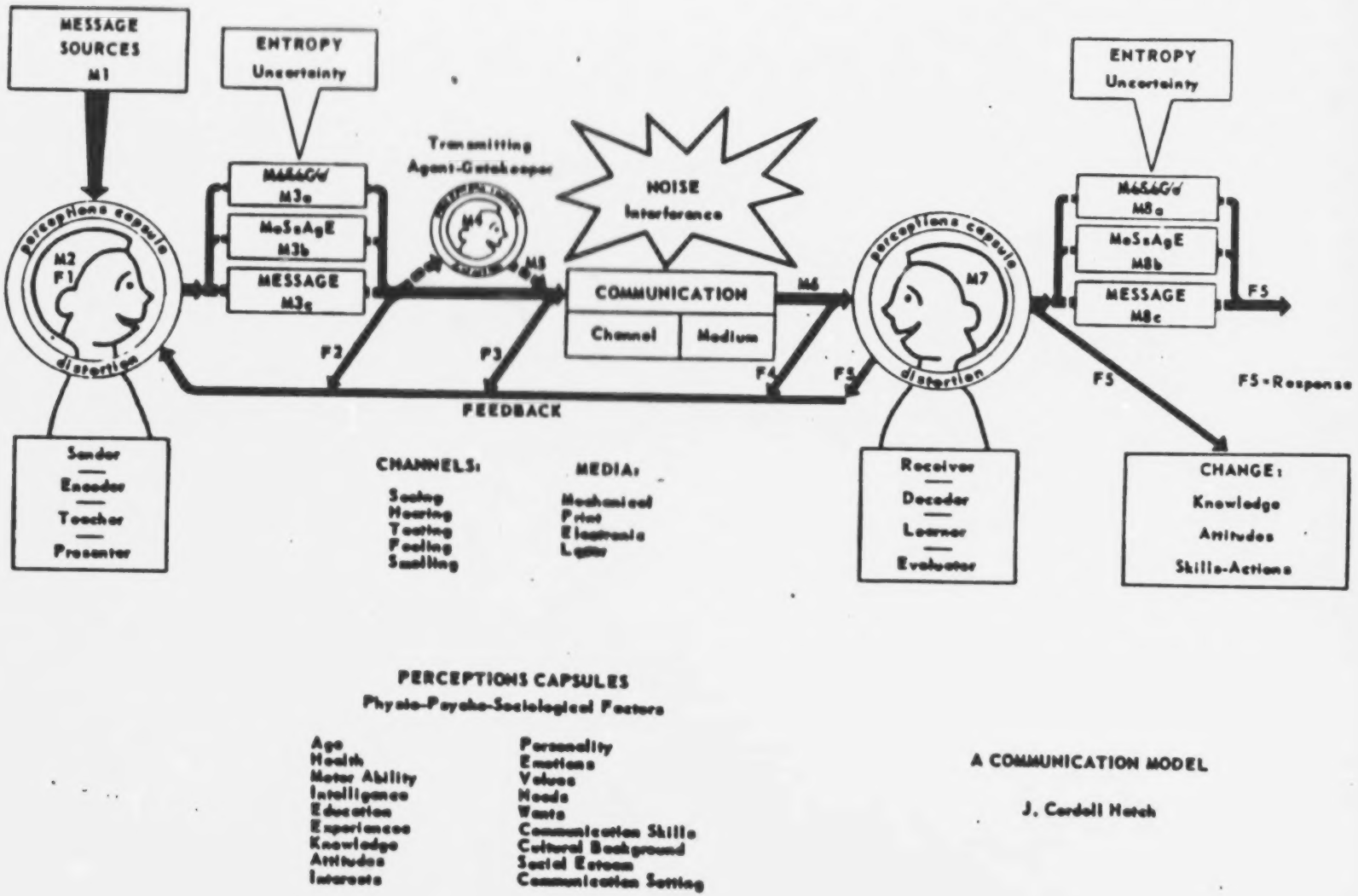
*Give your opinion as to whether or not the communications attempt was successful or not, given the intended audience. If you think it was not successful, discuss why you think so and suggest how you might improve it.

Students must type their responses and limit it to four pages,double-spaced. After my evaluation, examples analyzed by students are discussed in class. This critique assignment generates student interest, especially in examples which really "fail to communicate."

This assignment seems to be successful in achieving the primary goal of getting students to analyze each element of the communication process, as outlined in the Sender-Receiver model, in terms of its potential contribution to the "targeting" process. It also tends to turn students into more analytical critics of communication

attempts. Most importantly, this knowledge appears to give students a powerful tool to assist in designing future communication efforts.

FIGURE 1: The Sender-Receiver Communications Model



PERCEPTIONS CAPSULES

Physio-Psycho-Sociological Factors

Age	Personality
Health	Emotions
Motor Ability	Values
Intelligence	Needs
Education	Wants
Experiences	Communication Skills
Knowledge	Cultural Background
Attitudes	Social Esteem
Interests	Communication Setting

A COMMUNICATION MODEL

J. Cordell Hatch

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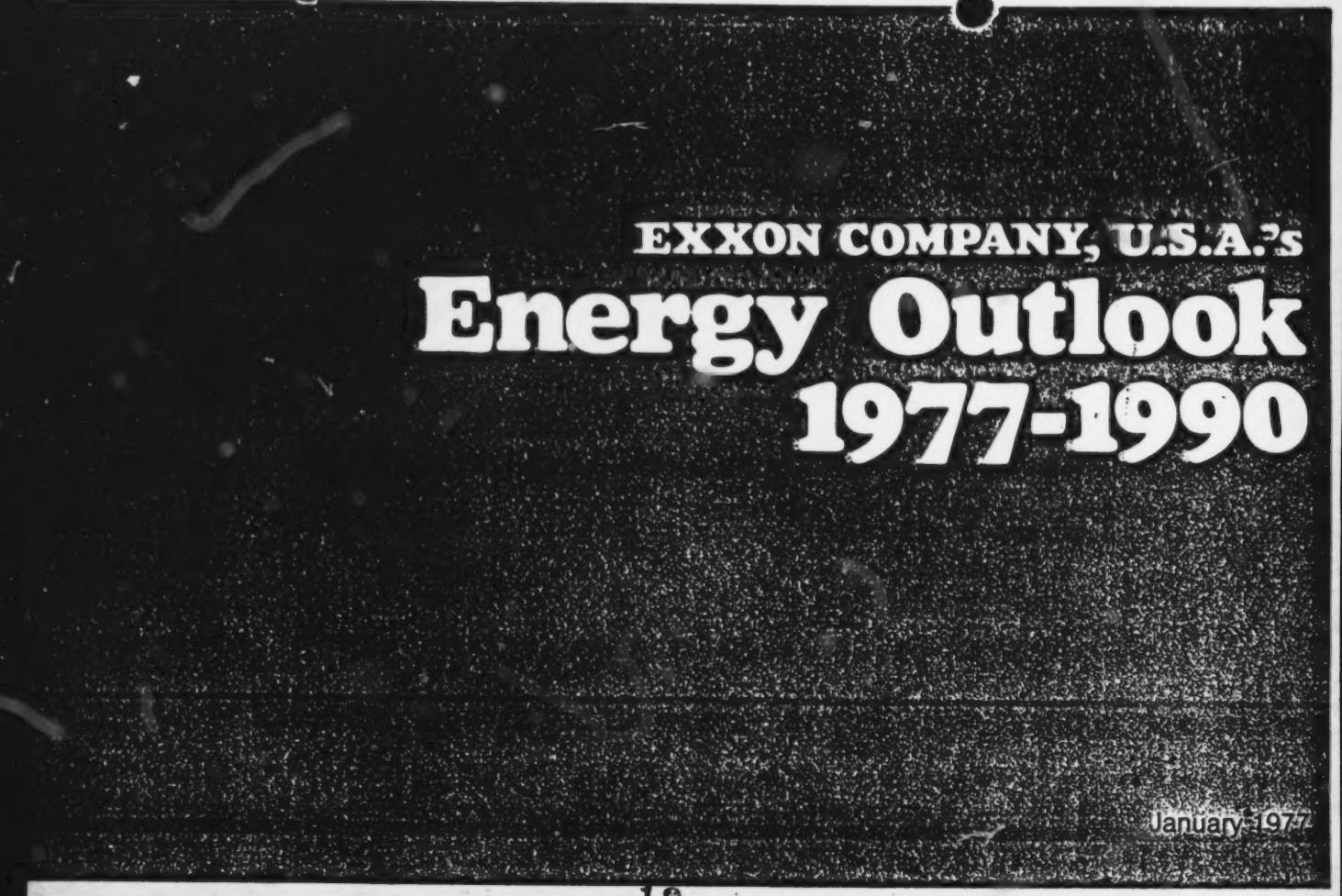
FIGURE 2: Example of Sender

Joe's Dope Sheet
NO UNAUTHORIZED REPAIRS
FIGHT CORROSION
When your commo gear ACHES for repair
Why it's NATURAL ENUF YOU should care...
But if YOU'RE not CHECKED OUT,
Dunno what it's ABOUT
Man, don't mess with that stuff on a DARE!
EASY ON KNOBS AND SWITCHES
CHECK CONTACTS, PINS AND CONNECTORS
DON'T YANK ON CORDS
CHECK CONNECTIONS
REMOVE BATTERIES WHEN NOT IN USE
WE HAVE THE WORLD'S BEST EQUIPMENT ...Take care of it

IF YOU WANT TO DISPLAY THIS CENTERPIECE ON YOUR BULLETIN BOARD, OPEN STAPLES, LIFT IT OUT AND PIN IT UP.

FIGURE 3: [redacted] Anonymous Sender



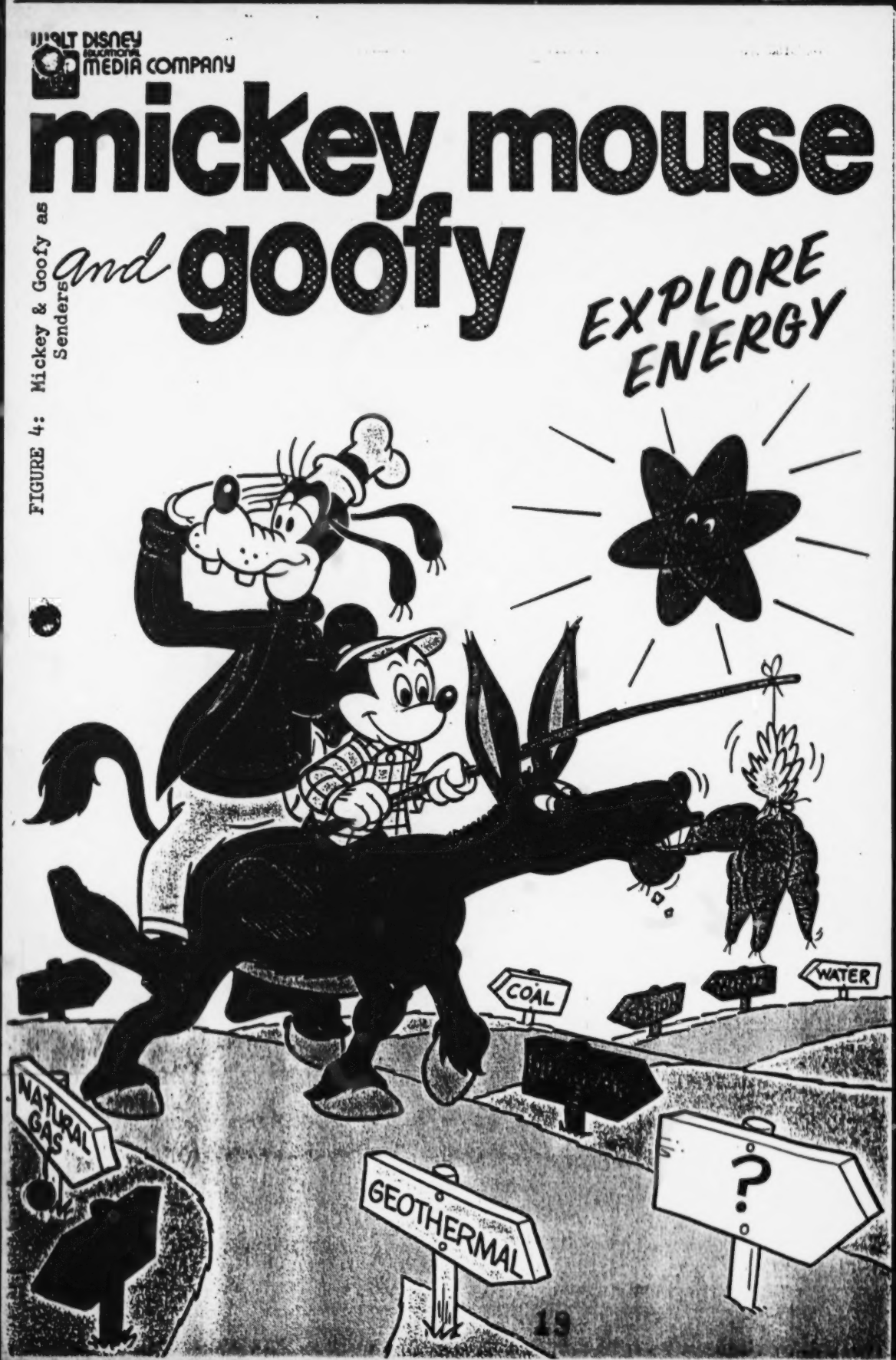


FIGURE 4: Mickey & Goofy as Senders

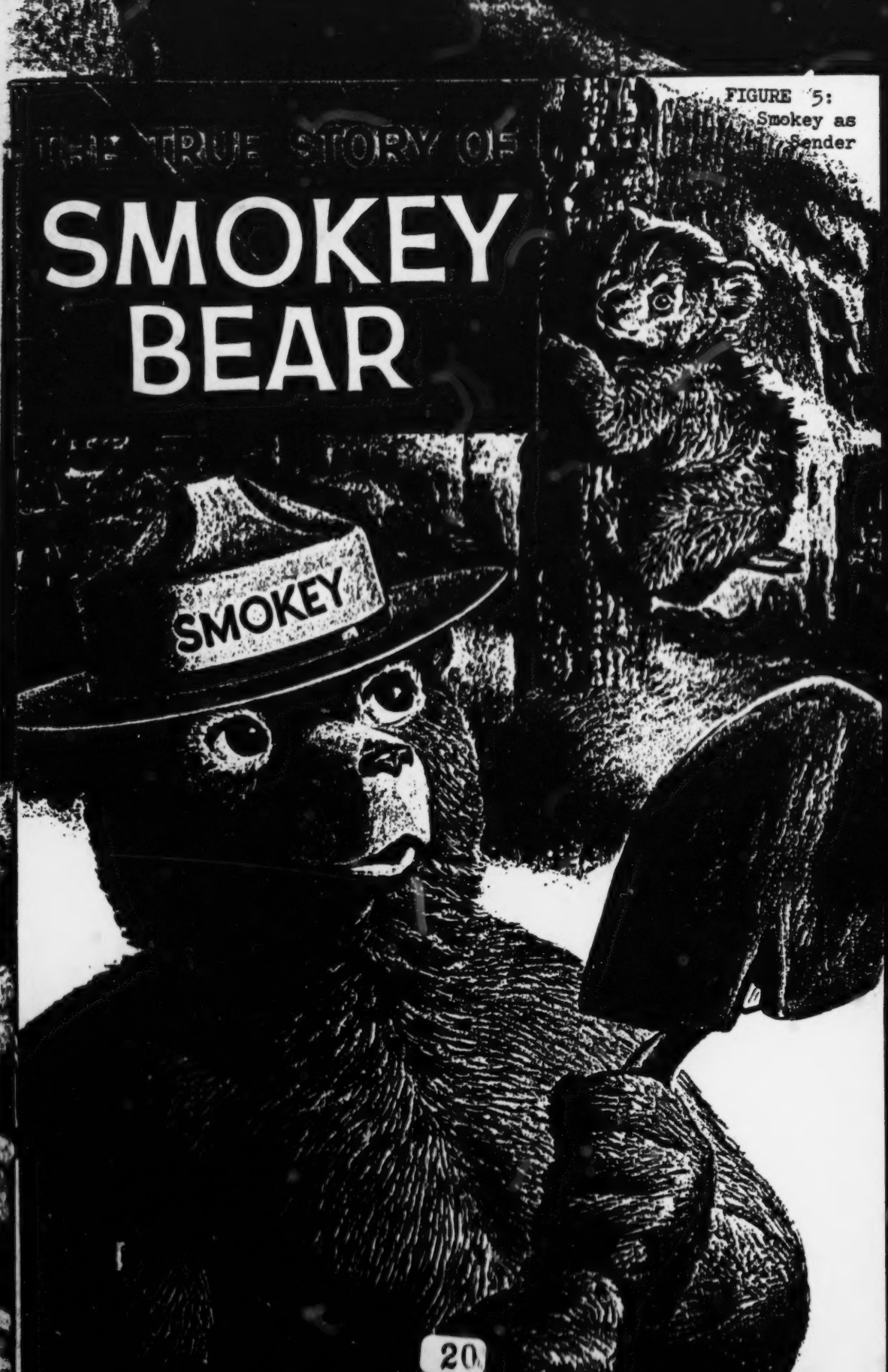


FIGURE 5:
Smokey as
Sender

FIGURE 6: McGruff as Sender

All dressed up with no place to go.

The Senior Prom would have been fun. If only someone hadn't decided to trash good ol' Central High. Broken windows. Lockers torn from their hinges. And oh yeah, lots of graffitti.

It's going to take a lot to fix it up. A lot of time. And money. In fact, so much money, it looks like there won't be enough for next year's Senior Prom.

Don't let this happen to your school. Keep your eyes open. If you see someone trashing your school, library, corner drug store, home – anywhere! – call the police. (You don't even have to give your name.) Help prevent vandalism. Write me, McGruff™ the Crime Dog, at Crime Prevention Coalition, Dept. B, Box 6600, Rockville, MD 20850.

Because vandalism isn't a joke. It's an outrage.

TAKE A BITE OUT OF CRIME™

Ad Council

A message from the Crime Prevention Coalition and the Ad Council.
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